JONATHAN HICKMAN • BRYAN HITCH • ANDREW CURRIE • ALEX SINCLAIR
ULTIMATE
INVASION
MARVEL
4

I know secrets.

That's great.

Does one of them have to do with the secret sauce of polymers in *the City?* Because so far, this resin isn't playing nice with the copper filaments.

Reed, can you hand me the thing with the--

Thanks.

Okay. That's as good as it's going to get. It *should* hold. I hope it holds.

It better hold.

So...

...what kind of *secrets?*

Neither ones whispered, nor the murmurs of the discontent...

Not from conversations overheard, or rumors that take root and become truth.

No, these are the ***best*** of secrets...

The ***sins*** the great ***Maker*** holds deep in his ***heart.***

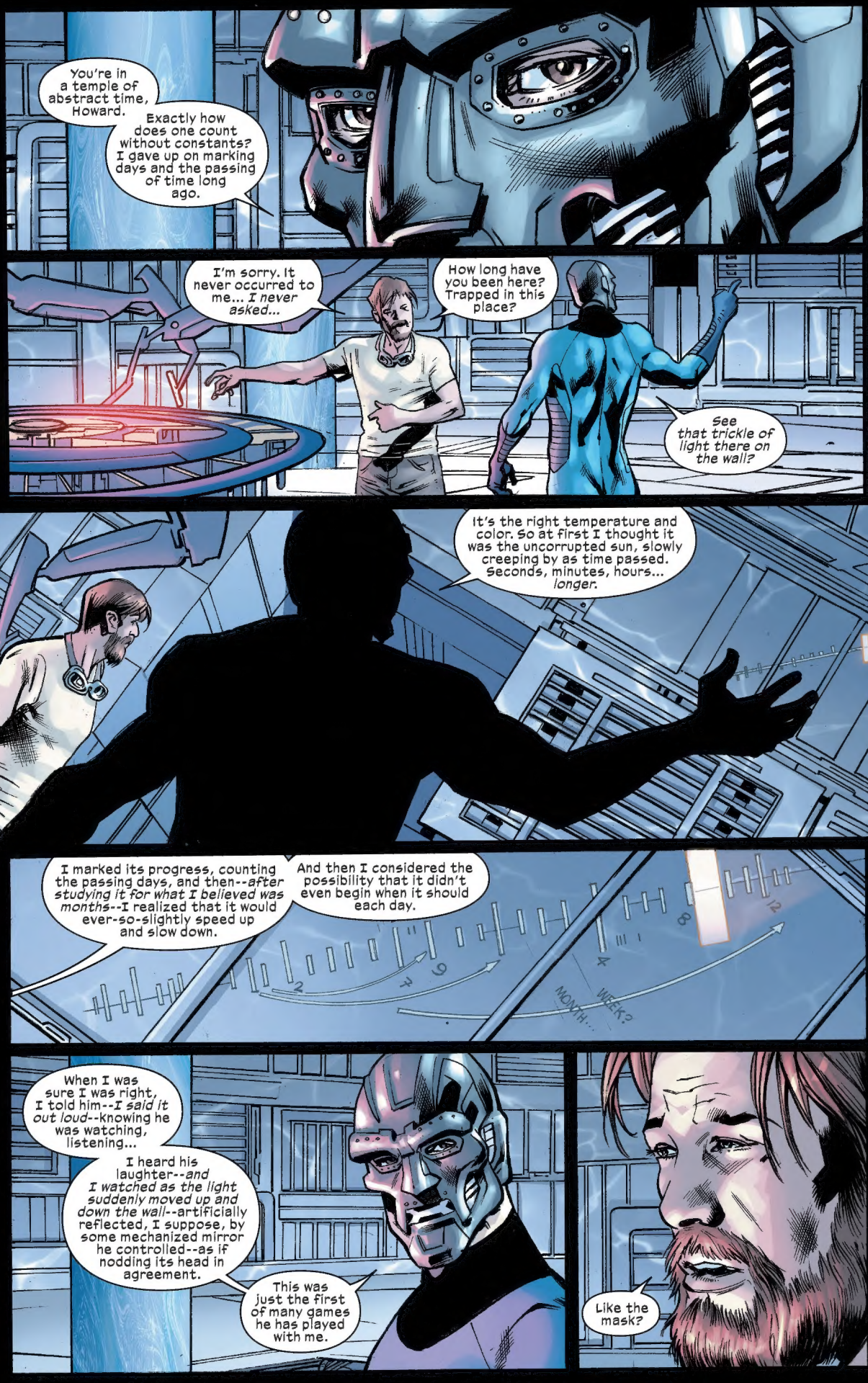
...

I'm listening.

I know where he is *from*. I know how he *made the world* as it is *now*.
I have seen it with my *own eyes* and, until now, have had no one to share it with.
But now I have you, Howard.
Do you want me to show you?
Absolutely. But first things first...
Because when I finish this, we just might have all the time in the world for the other.

AND NOW THERE ARE TWO IMMORTUS ENGINES

Whuff! Okay. I think I'm done.
The coil structure is elegant.
That it mimics the very nature of time is the world letting you know that your choices were correct.
But you might want to consider some kind of feedback mechanism...
Especially if your Immortus Engine is built to go both forward *and* backward through time--*one cannot assume there will be a pause between the two states...*
My god...
How did I miss that?
That single microsecond of overlap...there and back...all at once. The literal temporal branching of a human being.
Who knows what would--
Oh, someone knows.
Someone always knows.
Damn. I thought I was finally...
I guess I'm just tired.
Reed, can I ask you something?
Please do.
How long have we been working on this?
It feels like days, but I don't think I could put an exact number on it if I had to.


You're in a temple of abstract time, Howard.
Exactly how does one count without constants? I gave up on marking days and the passing of time long ago.
I'm sorry. It never occurred to me... *I never asked...*
How long have you been here? Trapped in this place?
See that trickle of light there on the wall?
It's the right temperature and color. So at first I thought it was the uncorrupted sun, slowly creeping by as time passed. Seconds, minutes, hours... *longer.*
I marked its progress, counting the passing days, and then--*after studying it for what I believed was months*--I realized that it would ever-so-slightly speed up and slow down.
And then I considered the possibility that it didn't even begin when it should each day.
MONTH...
WEEK?
When I was sure I was right, I told him--*I said it out loud*--knowing he was watching, listening...
I heard his laughter--*and I watched as the light suddenly moved up and down the wall*--artificially reflected, I suppose, by some mechanized mirror he controlled--as if nodding its head in agreement.
This was just the first of many games he has played with me.
Like the mask?

No. He's been very clear about that. This mask is no game at all.
It's who I really am.
This is a fully functional lab. Everything in here works--and while it appears I can come and go as I please, I can never truly escape.
Because I know that all of it is a contrivance to a greater, grander experiment--of which I am now sure I am the subject.
Yes, he tortures me. Yes, he hates me. But I do not know why.
I can help you escape.
Oh, Howard. Don't you understand?
You cannot run from who you are.

CHAPTER FOUR: “YESTERDAY, TODAY, TOMORROW”

ULTIMATE INVASION

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The City.
One week later.
Ready?
The hologram suit is *functional*. The conduit terminator is *acceptable*.
But my psyche is...below *tolerable thresholds*.
Ah. You're worried this might go wrong? That this is goodbye or something like that?
...
Yes.
I understand. *I feel the same way. But it's gonna be okay...*
I'll see you on the *other side*.

My loyal swords said that you wanted to see me...
They said you finally had something to show me...
Is it true?
Well done, Mr. Stark.

Tony
"So this is it?"
You've built it. The machine that will enable me to do all the things I've already done.
A way to make this world into the wonder that it now is?
NO.
NO?
"I simply copied it. Made one of my own--a better version, if I do say so myself.
"The other was made by someone else's hands. Yours, if I had to guess. You just forgot what you had done. Some missing memory of a more whole Maker."

Or maybe I will take this to a previous me, and I will copy it--make a better version of my own.
Maybe that's the way of things. A copy of a copy all the way down.
All you're telling me now is that I should crush it in my hands...be done with the whole unnatural ordeal.
My dear Howard, don't be rash...
"If I have done anything, surely I have shown you that, before all other things, we have a monster from the future who we have to kill."
Power conduit terminator armed.
He's a monster. You're a monster.
I am so tired of choosing between which monsters are more acceptable.
Power conduit terminator linked. Remote access granted.
"You don't deserve me.
"You deserve each other."
Power conduit terminator activated.
What have you done?
I've interrupted the city mainframe...dropped the temporal shield...

"I've opened the door to let the wolves in."

Power conduit terminator reactivated.
"And now we've locked them inside the City along with you."
There, my loyal legions...there he is.
There is no cost too high to pay--the Maker dies at any price.
Are all targets acceptable?
"All but one."
CHILDREN OF TOMORROW!
DEFEND YOUR CITY!

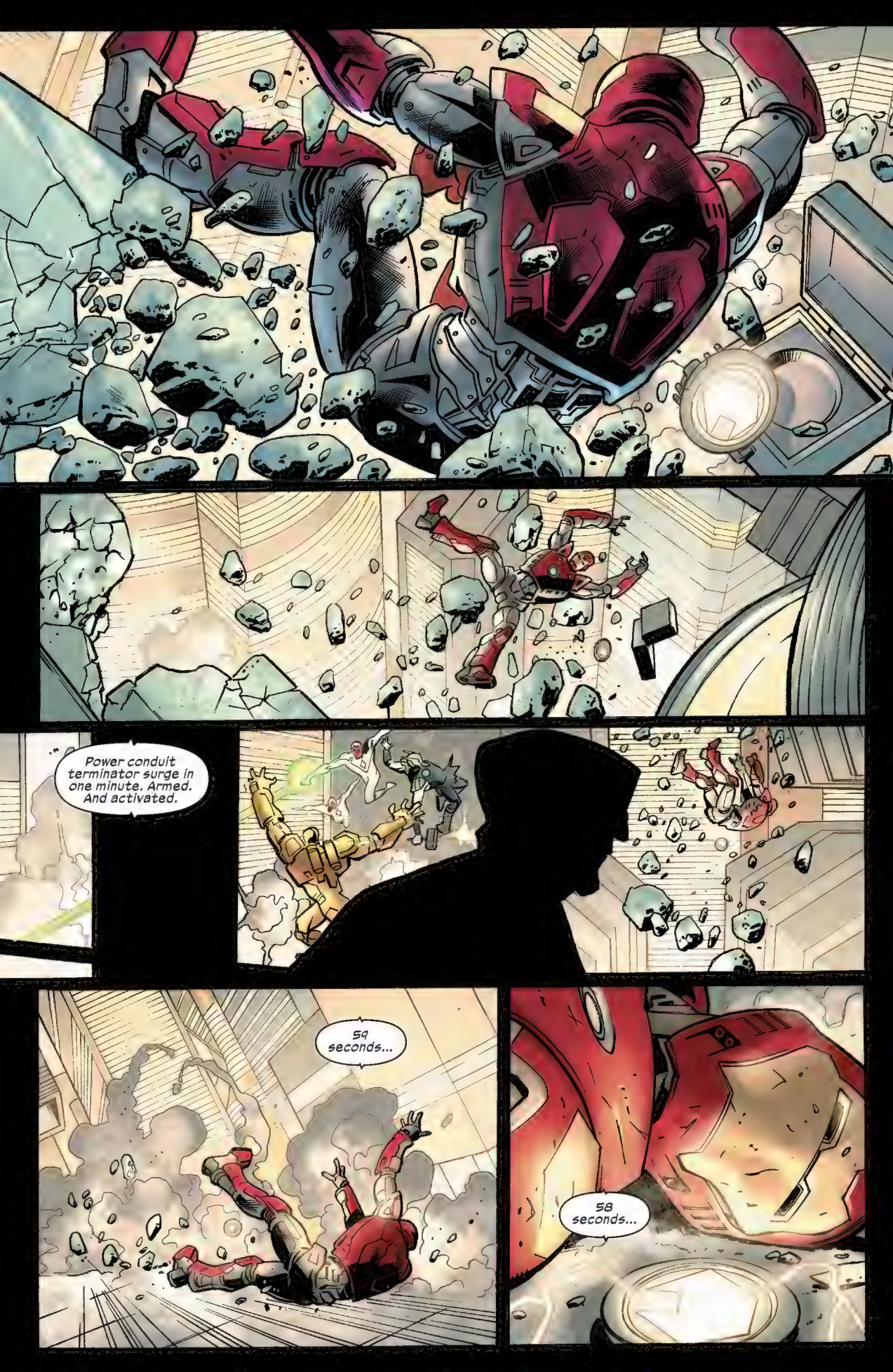
I can see those wheels spinning, Mr. Stark.
You've decided to play your own game, haven't you?
This isn't a game! You need to be stopped!
Stopped?
I'm just getting started. And you? You're just an ignorant, ungrateful child, rejecting your environment...
Like the world you exist in just happened.
"Well, it didn't just happen...
"I happened.
"And these people are here to erase all my mighty works.
"Including you.
"So you can run and hide, or you can fight inevitability...
"The choice is yours, Stark, though it matters very, very little.

As brilliant as you are, you couldn't be more wrong...
I have a third choice.
And I'm gonna take it.

Stop him! Stop-- HURKK!
Pawns! Pointless creatures! I understand why you do what you do. What else could anyone expect from something designed at creation to die.
But you are delaying what has to happen.
Stop all this obstruction-- serve your real purpose...
...AND BRING ME KANG!

There!
There he is!
I have waited two lives for this moment!
And now that moment is here!

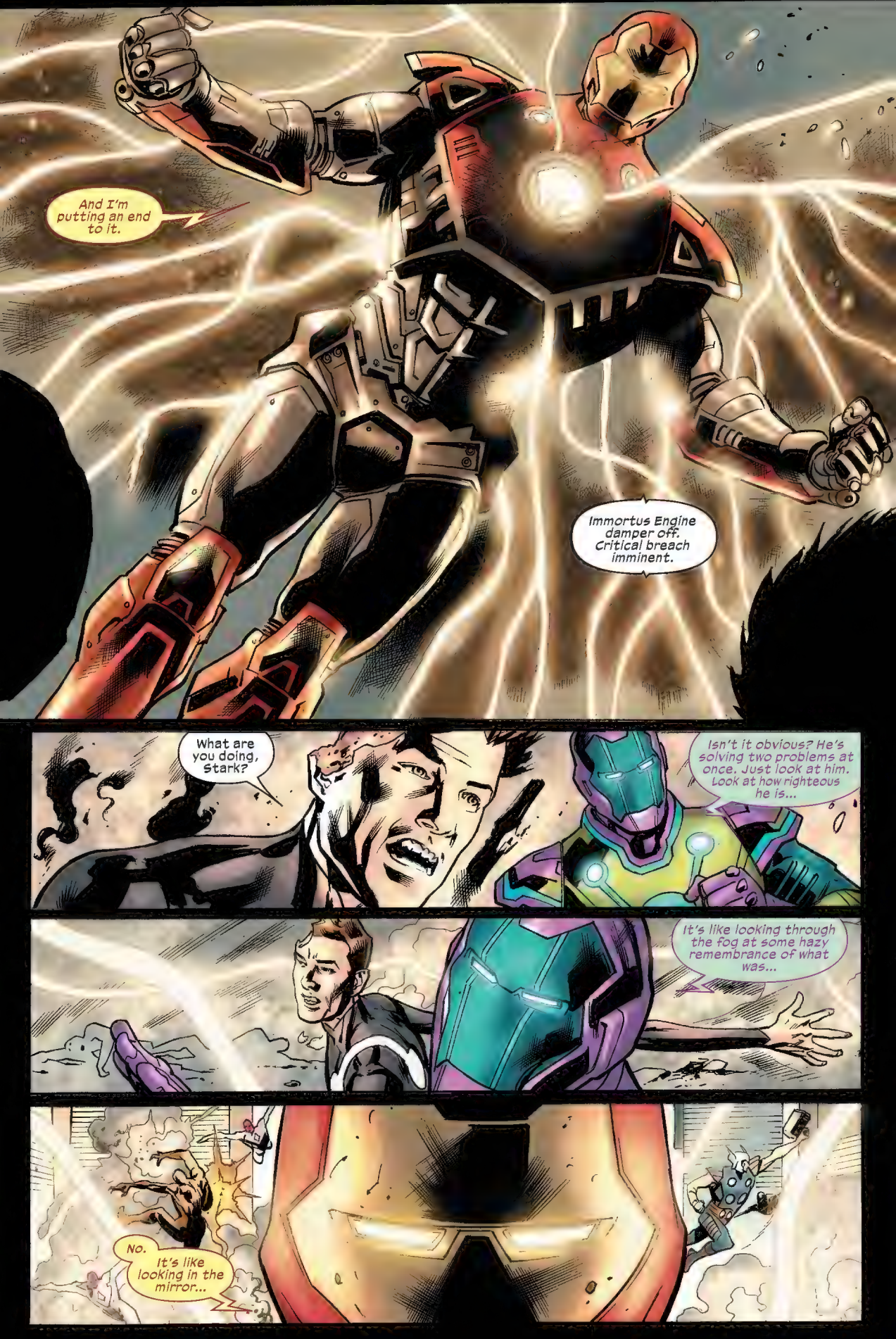
All right. Everyone's locked in and engaged in their quiet war...
All I have to do now is--
AARRGGHHH!
UHHUFFF!


Power conduit terminator surge in one minute. Armed. And activated.
59 seconds...
58 seconds...

"57 seconds..."
Thank you... thank you for that...
Pain clarifies... and suddenly, I remember...
I remember...
I remember you.

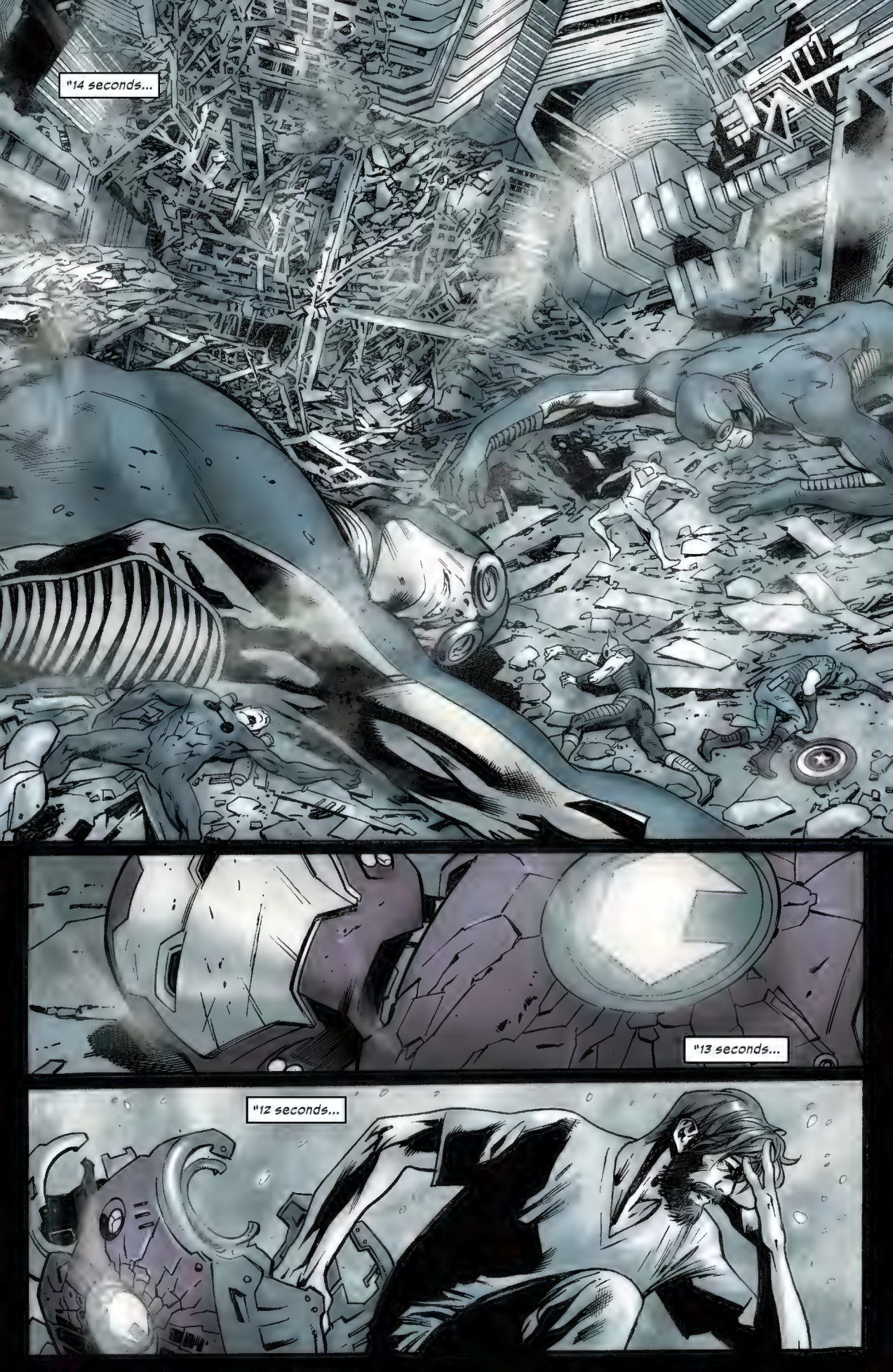
The Far Future.
Then.
I had to know.
Hmmmm?
I have built my kingdom. I have remade my world. And I had to know if it would endure...
This is as far as I could come--where the future ends...
Where am I? When am I?
You are here. NOW. As you were always going to be.
You are the Maker, and I've been waiting for you.
For revenge?
For reverence?
Who am I to you?
You are my maker...

...and what you how witness is my origin.
I remember...
I know who you are.
so do I.


And I'm putting an end to it.
Immortus Engine damper off. Critical breach imminent.
What are you doing, Stark?
Isn't it obvious? He's solving two problems at once. Just look at him. Look at how righteous he is...
It's like looking through the fog at some hazy remembrance of what was...
No.
It's like looking in the mirror...

...and hating what you see.

The Maker's Castle. Latveria.
I promised...
So why do I hesitate?
Is it because I have to consider this might be another prison for me?
One where the walls are made of obligation and not punishment.
And all-consuming in a way that my previous cell never could be.
Something broken...for someone broken...
Who can say?
The choice I leave to better angels.
"15 seconds...


"14 seconds...
"13 seconds...
"12 seconds...

"5 seconds...
"4 seconds...
"3 seconds...
"2 seconds...
"1 second..."

One week later.

Just look at it.

Like some kind of outrageous *ticking bomb.*

It's a fitting legacy for our dear, disappeared leader, no? Some elaborate game that ends with all of us dead.

What do we know *exactly?*

Not enough.

The dome--the City itself--is closed off. We've seen this before.
Merde ça vient d'arriver.
Yes. It did *just happen.*
But never for this long, *right?*
No one knew what he was doing when it originally appeared, but the story he told--*be it true or not*--is that the first time was for a month while inside a thousand years passed by.
So. This... this is something far more *foreboding.*
Yes, I'd say that 24 months is cause for dread.
I asked him once--*it was autumn, and I remember the smell of burning leaves in the air*--was time dilation in the dome a *constant?*
If *one month* equaled a ***thousand years,*** would *three months* equal ***three thousand years?***
What did he say?

He just smiled, and said...
Some secrets are mine and mine alone.
So we have two years until the Dome reopens?
Two years to hold this together.
Or two years to tear it apart.
Or we could just drink and defile ourselves. Whatever is required.
C'est la vie.
This is a time for serious people.
You could-- at the very least-- pretend to be one.

And you shouldn't pretend like it's not a valid choice.
After all, there's no guarantee that whatever comes out of that thing when it opens remotely resembles you or me.
Or shares our hopes and desires.
Or thinks of us as equal-- as human-- at all.
Well, this is clearly a subject that requires a bit more thought. Perhaps we should tackle a more short-term problem:
What do we do about America and their Union?

First Stane, now Stark...
One of our seven sovereign bodies has no head.
Appoint someone new?
Find the right man for the job?
Or...
...we could split it up.
Well now. That would require a firm hand.
Wouldn't it?
yes...

I suppose it *would*.

Shall we vote?

Stark Tower.
He gave this to you?
The world was ending, Anthony. The future colliding with the now.
Temporal kings were being overthrown, and multiversal evils were being undone...
But bringing these things to you was my *most important task.*
This *machine*-- the broken Immortus Engine, which you and I have already repaired--the *secret files* you showed me, and this...
A *letter* from my *father.*

While I have some notion of what *could* be done with these things--the potential of them...
...he said you would know what *should* be done.
And so the choice should be yours.
...
Is my father dead?
Variables, probabilities, the very character of the man fighting for his life...
I'm sorry, but I have no way to definitively answer that question.
I'm gonna need a suit.

It'll need to handle temporal shear and need some kind of integrated navigational control.
And a *weapon*...it should also be a *weapon*.
Yeah.
Without a doubt.

Okay.
That should do it...
Let's get to work. Are you ready?
Of course.
All we need is a place to start.
Well, based on the Maker's files, there were things he missed--things he couldn't find. I think I have a pretty good idea why.
And what are you going to call yourself?
Iron Man? After your father?
No. He's Iron Man.

For now, I'll just be Iron Lad.
At least until I've earned a better name.

EPILOGUE: "WIN"

The past.
My dearest Anthony,
I am so tired of this world.
I am so tired of the people in it.
Of what they accept...
And of what they have become.
But I know the fault was mine. Maybe more than most because of my gifts and the means that came with them.
I was so wrapped up in the good things I was doing--the work and the bounty that work provided us--that I didn't care enough to notice what was really going on in the world I was shaping.

I know now that it is a false, fallen world that we paint as "good enough," but under its skin, we all know it is rotten to the core.
And on reflection, almost all of the things I have made do nothing but support the systems that reduce men and women to pawns and playthings...to workers and consumers...to servants and slaves.
All the things I have made are tainted with a patina of evil.
All of them but one.
And that is you.
If this has found its way to you, then I am gone and I have left you a world that is no place for the innocent.
But only innocent eyes can see it for what it could be.
Remember, Anthony...
It's never too late to change the world around you...

You just have to fight.
And you have to win.
THE BEGINNING...